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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 009095

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: JORDANIANS AWAIT NEWS OF ARAFAT'S FATE

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) News of Arafat's impending death and speculation over succession have dominated Jordanian conversations in the waning days of the Ramadan season. Many expect that an announcement of his passing will be marked in Jordan with a non-violent outpouring of emotion; this initial, sympathetic reaction is likely to give way to a focus on succession issues. King Abdullah told visiting congressmen that regardless of who replaces Arafat in the immediate aftermath of his continued incapacitation or death, elections should be held as soon as possible. Most Jordanian interlocutors expressed optimism that the transition after Arafat's death would be peaceful, and hope it would provide an opening to jump-start the peace process. Nearly all called on the U.S. and Israel to take concrete steps to show support for any new Palestinian government. End Summary.

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JORDANIANS WATCHING DEVELOPMENTS CLOSELY  
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12. (C) Jordanians -- Palestinian-Jordanians and East Bankers alike -- are following closely the news of Yasser Arafat's deteriorating health. With no real news on Arafat's prognosis, rumors proliferate instead, including speculation that Arafat had been poisoned, that Arafat is worse off than has been reported, or that he is already dead. Some critics -- while expressing sadness at Arafat's situation on a human level -- opine sarcastically that the "powers that be" (including Suha Arafat) are busily jockeying over power and PLO/PA coffers, waiting for the opportune moment to announce his death.

13. (C) Loath to comment on the delicate issue of Arafat's mortality in public lest it reveal the GOJ's true (negative) feelings about the Palestinian leader, Jordanian official reaction has been minimal and respectful. After providing the helicopters to transport Arafat out of Ramallah on October 28, King Abdullah spoke once with Arafat by telephone in Paris on October 31 to wish him a speedy recovery, according to Jordan's official news agency. FM Mulki said in an interview: "We in Jordan are following President Arafat's health condition with interest and wish him quick recovery." Privately, the King told the Charge that when he first saw the images of Arafat being transported out of the Muqata'a, he felt pity for the ailing leader. While no love is lost between the Hashemites and the Palestinian leader, the GOJ will tread lightly, recognizing the potential for a negative backlash from its majority Palestinian population.

14. (C) Royal Court Minister Samir Rifai told Charge that the GOJ would oppose interring Arafat at the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem (Comment: By all accounts not even a remote possibility.) Jordan did not oppose his burial on the West Bank, but Rifai said the King's opinion was the further away from Jerusalem Arafat is buried, the better. However, Rifai emphasized that the GOJ would not get involved in this highly sensitive issue. A funeral or burial in Amman were not options.

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HOPING FOR A SMOOTH TRANSITION, NEW OPPORTUNITIES  
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15. (C) Jordanians expect that news of Arafat's passing would be met with widespread expressions of grief and sympathy. The GOJ probably will declare a period of mourning. Peace Corps volunteers report that conversation in several East Bank villages is dominated by hopes that any mourning period will dovetail with the Eid holidays, and thus maximize days off from work.

16. (C) Police contacts who expressed concern when news of Arafat's illness first broke now downplay the likelihood of violence, though they have prepared contingency plans, and are closely monitoring the refugee camps.

17. (C) Most Jordanians expect an initial outpouring of sympathy to be short-lived as many will quickly focus on succession issues. Our contacts hope that the leadership

transition will go smoothly for the sake of regional stability. Indeed, many have told us they see his eventual passing as a chance to break the stalemate in the peace process. Rifai said that under any scenario, it would take time for any leadership to emerge, but Arafat's passing would almost certainly present an opportunity for positive change as nothing could be worse than the current situation. PLC member and political analyst Ghazi Sa'adi (who confided his belief that Arafat is already dead) told us he expects a peaceful transition, and that relations with Israel could be marginally better. He predicted Abu Mazen will emerge as the next president, but also sees positive signs that a national government comprised of all factions will emerge. In an interview, Islamic Action Front Secretary General Hamza Mansur encouraged national unity as well: "The right option in the present phase is what HAMAS and the other Palestinian groups have proposed, which is the formation of a unified national leadership representing all the groups."

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ELECTIONS SHOULD FOLLOW QUICKLY  
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18. (C) King Abdullah told two separate groups of visiting congressmen this week that regardless of who replaces Arafat immediately after his death, Palestinian elections should be held as soon as possible. Even if Arafat pulls through, he believes his poor health hinders his ability to lead, and the "new generation" of Palestinian leaders must be allowed to emerge. He pointed to Marwan Barghouti as a prime candidate, and speculated there was more to his relationship with the Israelis than met the eye.

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ONUS ON ISRAEL, U.S. TO SUPPORT NEW LEADER  
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19. (C) Regardless of how Arafat's situation plays out, our Jordanian interlocutors see a significant role for Israel and the United States in ensuring a smooth transition to the post-Arafat era. During his meeting with visiting congressmen, the King urged that the U.S. and Israel avoid "the mistakes made when they failed to empower Abu Mazen as prime minister." As soon as the new leaders emerge, it is crucial to give them the means to have an impact on the socio-economic level so ordinary people understand right away what positive benefits they will receive, according to the King. Sa'adi echoed this, saying it would "help tremendously" if the U.S. and Israel could devise tangible ways to support whatever leadership emerges. Prominent East Banker Suleiman Arabiyyat told us that doing so would help the U.S. recoup somewhat its tarnished image in the region. Jamal Talhat, an East Banker with the National Defense College, agreed, saying it is in the interest of the countries surrounding Israel, of the West Bank and Gaza -- as well as of the United States -- to do anything they can to support any new Palestinian government.

18. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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